
The Record Group Concept In Contemporary Archives

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All professional definitions of the term "Archives" use the concept of "an organic whole of documents growing out of the activities of a physical or legal body". This concept is reflected in the basic archival principle of "respect des fonds" or "principle of provenance". In translating this theoretical approach into the practical preservation of the "organic whole" of an administrative body two questions have to be answered:

1. How can we define a "body"? Are we speaking about the preservation of the most concise or the most comprehensive administrative organism?
2. By what characteristics can we decide if an administrative organism is considered to be complete by itself?

Johannes Papritz, at the International Congress on Archives in Brussels in 1964¹ related four criteria to the Soviet-Russian theoretical approach in defining the independent status of an administrative unit:

- 1) a legal basis of the unit, its tasks and competences; 2) an independent budget; 3) an establishment list of its own; 4) an official seal or stamp.

These four criteria may perhaps be considered to be a convenient basis for the comprehensive organism, but for the most concise body to be preserved as a whole it is more difficult to establish the criteria, and as archivists we try to find pragmatic solutions by establishing record groups and sub-groups.

However, the problem is much more complex because of the dynamics of modern administration and the frequent changes in organizations and administrative patterns. Some 20 years ago a number of papers were published advocating the abandonment of the Record Group Concept in Modern Records in favor of basing archival arrangement and inventorying on "Series"; this means the original record-keeping units as the "Whole" to be preserved and not the administrative bodies.

This thesis was put forward, i.e. by an Australian Archivist Peter J. Scott in a paper published in 1966². Scott based his approach on difficulties encountered with record-series created by one agency and later incorporated into another agency and transferred to the archives by this second or perhaps even a third agency. The second difficulty arose, according to Scott, by the practice of using the record groups for determining the

shelf-location. Let us answer immediately that this question of shelf-location was once considered to be of major importance, but already at the beginning of this century the Archivist of Danzig, Max Baer, propagated the solution of reconstructing the original order on paper only and storing and shelving the records according to administrative considerations³. The principle of provenance does not mean to arrange the records physically according to their original order.

Another call for the revision of the Record Group Concept in the National Archives of the U.S.A. was published the same year by Mario D. Fenyo⁴. He published a critical analysis, excellently written, of the concept and the history of the definition used in the National Archives. I have to confess that even 23 years ago, when first reading the paper, I was not convinced by the critique. On the contrary, I learned from the minutes of the deliberation of the committee appointed by the Archivist of the United States in 1940 and charged with formulating a policy for arranging and inventorying archives, published by Fenyo, how understanding and not dogmatic the first generation of archivists of the U.S. was. They learned the lessons from the European experience and adopted a system of their own. Theory is an end by itself, and Dr. Buck - the second Archivist of the United States - and his colleagues tried to combine theoretical and pragmatic solutions.

We have, therefore, to answer four main questions:

- a) Is the "record group" a concept in the field of archival management, or is the "record group" a concept in the sphere of archival theory?
- b) What purpose does the "record group" serve theoretically and administratively?
- c) What are the typical structures of modern governmental records?
- d) In what way do these structures influence the formation of "record groups"?

The basic answers to our first two questions were already given by the National Archives of the U.S.A. in 1941 and published in Staff Information Circular No. 15 in July 1950, when defining a record group as "a major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and to the desirability of

making the unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of inventories”.

This definition makes it clear that the “record group” as a concept belongs to archival management and not so much to archival theory. It should be stressed, however, that the “record group” is established - as said in the definition - in accordance with principles based on archival theory. In order to clarify what was apparently meant by the word in the definition “with due respect to the principle of provenance”, we have to dwell on these theoretical principles.

Three different frameworks form the foundations of the principle of provenance and can be the basis for a “record group”.

The first: The system for record-keeping, one single registry or one filing scheme. The second framework can be the essential function which an administration has to fulfill. This means the purpose for which an administrative body has been established. The third framework can be an administrative one. Generally it was considered that this administrative framework is the main basis for establishing a “record group” in accordance with the principle of provenance. This was certainly right at a time when one comprehensive administrative unit as a whole Ministry or, in the American administration, a whole Department of Bureau, had one single central registry. As a Ministry or Bureau had a well defined framework of functions, interdependent and interwoven, it had one single central registry. This assumption meant that there were in reality identical frameworks for record-keeping, administration and function.

In modern records, accumulated during the last 50 years - and this process is now accelerated by new technology and the ever increasing bureaucracy - we have quite different organizational set-ups.

Functions are more stable than the organizational framework. Political reasons bring about the establishment of new administrative units and even split up functional units and define in a more exact and sometimes sophisticated way two or three functions which were previously considered to be one organic whole. The disappearance or cessation of a function have no bearing on discussion, as the relevant series or “record group” simply cease to exist and are considered “closed”. But in addition to the splitting up of a function there is in the modern administration a much bigger differentiation in the keeping of records and nearly no modern office has any longer a central registry or central filing rooms. Today it would be anachronistic to think that the 3 different frameworks of record keeping, function and administration could jointly be the basis for the establishment of modern “record groups”. We have to admit, therefore, that each of these frameworks separately may form the basis of a “record group”.

In order to avoid misunderstandings I would like to differentiate between four types of “record groups”: 2 types

of organic and 2 types of artificial “record groups”. An organic record group could be the former type of one unit with one registry or one filing system pertaining mainly to one essential function. This function will generally be defined in one central law or one basic administrative decision, with all addition, corrections, regulations and ordinances. This means one indivisible record cell. The other type could be the organic record group of an administrative unit which has more than one record-keeping cell, different registries pertaining to different aspects of one or more laws.

I would like to stress that this concept based on record cells pertains to the essential functions only and excludes the auxiliary and housekeeping functions which have no bearing on the establishment of record groups. You may have one registry system for the main essential function and two or more additional systems for the auxiliary functions and we would still speak about a record group of one cell, as the auxiliary functions are not relevant to our analysis. Housekeeping records, even if they are not disposed of, are in any case of minor importance and no record group should be organized or established for them, besides the preservation of the necessary files of documentation on the organization as such.

In every record group one may find different chronological layers, strata based on simple cut-off periods or changes in the technical filing methods. As long as there are no basic changes of functions or authority these are different layers within one system.

Within this second type of organic group of more than one cell one may even have different chronological layers as every cell may have its own system, its own cut-offs and its own development.

There are also two types of artificial record groups. The first is artificial only in the way its organic cells are brought together under one roof for the purpose of archival management. Small archival units which are of one of the first two types, but too small to appear as a major unit in an archival institution, may be grouped together if they have common characteristics. A classic example would be a record group of Enquiry Commissions appointed by the government. Each such commission is a unit comprising the whole of its own organic records, but for archival administration it is more efficient and much easier to group all such commissions together under one descriptive roof. This will be an artificial record group composed of organic cells.

The last and fourth type of record group would be the documentary record group, which in reality is a collection of different documents, files and material of different or special formats. A documentary record group is subject or format oriented, bringing together in a non-organic way documents on a relevant topic, territory or personality, or of a special format, such as photographs or films.

It should be stressed, however, that personal papers can be an organic record cell - though very often unorganized

- and in most archival institutions they are grouped as organic cells - sometimes with collected additions - in artificially composed record groups. In libraries, however, personal papers are very often handled as collections of manuscripts without any intention of preserving organic growth.

I would like to add a few words about the sometimes heard thesis that the record group concept is not valid any longer and one should arrange records according to series. If the meaning of the word "series" is one record-keeping system, one record cell, then I agree on the theoretical basis, but I have my doubts about the managerial aspect of our discussion. Instead of a few hundred record groups listed in a guide and forming the basis for archival management, we would have to deal with many thousands of series. But more serious is the use of the term "series" as a descriptive unit when a number of series are in reality one organic cell and this proposed approach of putting the series in the place of the record group would make impossible any archival description and logic arrangement.

Twenty-five years ago Oliver Holmes published a classical paper on Arrangement of Archives⁵, though some of his conclusions are no longer valid. The Israeli practice developed, at the time he published his paper, a more pragmatic approach based on the same principles. In our archives the depository level means "storing area" and by now we have at the State Archives 15 such areas which serve managerial purposes only. All court records, for example, are in one store unit. Sometimes one record group can be divided physically between two or even three storing areas. For example, files of the Prime Minister's Office are partly in a special storing area of classified security material and some of its audio-visual records in the storing area reserved for these formats. The location symbol of individual items will always be composed of the symbol of the storing area and the container (box) number within this area. Within one storing area there are many record groups which form units for administrative and descriptive purposes. A record group is described by information on its administrative history and the main functions of the administration. The main descriptive units - on the other hand - are the series, sub-series and files.

As said before, there is no connection between physical arrangement on the shelves, which is reflected in the storing units, and their numerical lists only, and the description which is based mainly on series and related to the record cells and the record group as a whole.

In concluding my remarks I wish to say a few words on the problem of transfer of functions and record series from one organism to another. On principle the last administrative organism in which the records were actively accumulated is to be considered the originating agency of a series. Cross references from one record group to another will always solve the problem. With the help of computerized lists and inventories this is certainly no problem. Functions which tend to migrate - together with their records - from one organism to

another are best considered record groups in their own right, even if at times they did not have the characteristics of an organic administration of their own. □

¹ARCHIVUM vol. XIV (1964) p.16.

²Scott, Peter J. The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment. *American Archivist*, vol. 29, Apr. 1966.

³Brenneke/Leesh. *Archivkunde*. Leipzig, 1953, p.83.

⁴Fenyo, Mario D. The Record Group Concept: A Critique. *American Archivist*, vol. 27, Jan. 1964.

⁵Holmes, Oliver W. Archival Arrangement - Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels. *American Archivist*, vol. 27, Jan. 1964.